

The local governance of safety & security in Belgium

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Introduction

First of all, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to talk about the local governance of safety and security in Belgium. As I'm not a practitioner, I won't be selling you a 'best practice', but explain how safety and security is coordinated in Belgian municipalities. The short answer is: it depends on the city you're looking at. So I will argue that we should take this insight, the complexity and contingency of local configurations, as a point of departure.

My argument is based on a policy supporting research I did a couple of years ago for the Belgian Federal government (Bauwens, Enhus, Ponsaers, Reynaert, & Van Assche, 2011). It was a case study in three Belgian cities using expert interviews and document analysis as a research method.

I will start with a brief presentation of the governmental context; a quick overview of the institutional framework, as it shapes the local governance of safety and security, the second part of my presentation. I will conclude with the advice we formulated for our government in regard to the coordination of local safety and security practice.

As a criminologist, my preferred point of departure is the law in action. How it is used and abused, how it enables and constrains. Although of vital importance, my point of reference will not be the institutional framework, but the way it is elaborated in practice. And this reminded me to this beautiful work of art by the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher. It represents a self-sustaining closed system: the water that falls down from the waterfall is the same water that flows back to it and feeds it.

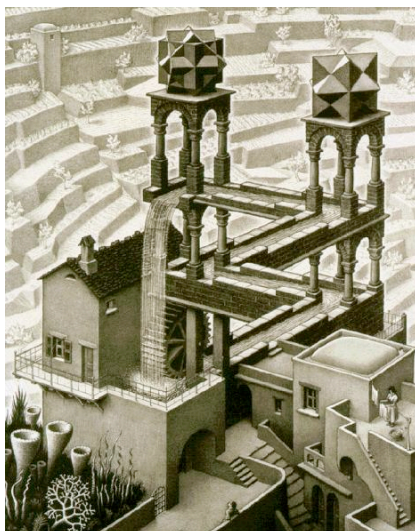


Fig. 1: MC Escher, 1961

I will argue that we can think about safety and security policies in a similar way. Physically, it is actually impossible to create this waterfall, a perpetual mobile, in our real world. But we can identify, theorise and actually represent each of the components on paper and develop a well-

engineered blueprint. But this image reminds us that it is a very complex task to translate these ideas into a working model.

Local crime and security policies are not self-sustaining closed systems. They require effort and engagement, feedback and input. Moreover, this work of art is also a stark reminder that security policies are not only about effectiveness and efficiency, but about normativity, meaning and expression as well.

But before I elaborate, let's return to the governmental context in which these policies are formed. I could give you the Belgian constitution as a point of departure. But in this day and age, if you want to find out something: you Google it and end up reading the Wikipedia entry. And this does provide me with an excellent point of departure.¹

Institutional context

Belgium is, of course, considerably smaller than Poland, both in size and population (cf. Poland < 300 000 km & < 38 mil. people). It was established in 1831 as a French speaking unitary state, but we are now, after a couple of constitutional reforms, a Federal State made up of communities and regions. Wikipedia tells us that, as a result, we have a complex system of government. And also that information is correct.

This map gives us the outline of Belgium as a federal state. But in the sixties we drew a line across Belgium, separating the Dutch speaking community in the North from the French speaking community in the South. A linguistic border was created, the foundation of the contemporary subdivision of Belgium.

Article 1 of the Belgian constitution now defines Belgium as a federal state, composed of three language communities and three territorial regions. In principle, each layer, including the federal, has their own competences and autonomous institutions – parliament, government and public services

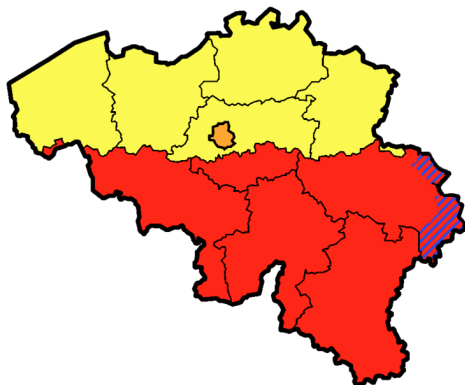


Fig. 2: Communities and regions in Belgium

In a nutshell, and this is relevant for my story, **communities** exercise competences oriented towards cultural and personal matters of the individuals of a certain language community. This entails education, health policy, social welfare and protection of youth. The **regions** have authority in fields connected with their territory such as economic development, employment, agriculture, housing, transportation, town and country planning. They supervise the otherwise independent local municipalities. Belgium consists of 589 municipalities. 308 of those municipalities are within the Flemish region, 19 in Brussels and 262 in the Walloon region. The largest municipality, Antwerp, has

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgium>

more than 500 000 inhabitants, the smallest only 87. It is at the level of the municipalities, regardless of their size, that the coordination of safety and security takes place.

This map also include the **provinces**. One of their duties is to support local governments, for example in exchanging information and best practices related to crime prevention. In fact, I could show you now a whole bunch of other maps with administrative subdivisions or information that are relevant to local security policies. There are the **judicial departments**, which are now being enlarged, the **disaster management territories** and the **local police zones**. The message, I guess, is that all of these different layers are in some way or another relevant to the question of the establishment and coordination of security policies. And this brings me to the second part of my presentation: the local governance of crime and security.

The local governance of insecurity in Belgium

The Federal government is responsible for crime policy, security and justice. But the communities are responsible for 'social' prevention initiatives, while the regions are responsible for the structural aspects of urban policy and the organisational aspects of the municipalities. It is at the local level of the municipalities, these different rationalities, incentives to work on certain priorities, initiatives to take measures, come together and ought to be merged.

The municipalities are the smallest administrative subdivision to have democratically elected representation. **The municipal council** is the representative assembly and consists of members directly elected for a term of office of six years. It is responsible for all matters that are of municipal interest. The daily administration is taken care of by the **college of mayor and aldermen**. They constitute the executive organ in the municipality. The aldermen are chosen from the municipal council and, most of the time, this is also the case for the mayor. The **mayor** is a politician elected out of the municipal council. He or she is considered the head of the municipality. But at the same time, the mayor is also the representative of the Federal and Regional government and should ensure the executions of laws, decrees, ordinances and orders at the local level.

Crucially, the mayor bears the legal responsibility of safety and security in the municipality and is responsible for the maintenance of public order, public security and public health in his or her municipality. The mayor is the legal head of the administrative police. In that capacity, he has a privileged relation with the emergency services such as the police and the fire department, which are organised on different administrative levels, and the public prosecutor's office. The mayor has a pivotal role in the local safety policy and is appointed as 'director' of the local security policy.

Explicit security and crime prevention policies in the municipal level, however, only emerged in the '80s. Initially, it was the local police who coordinated the efforts. It was only with the help of so-called 'security and prevention contracts', established by the Federal government in 1992, that crime prevention became a local policy issue.

These contracts were available to selected cities only. They were negotiated by the mayor and the head of the police force. A compulsory public servant for prevention and a municipal advisory board on prevention ensured the execution and coordination of the different prevention projects. A specially appointed municipal employee, an internal evaluator, evaluated these projects.

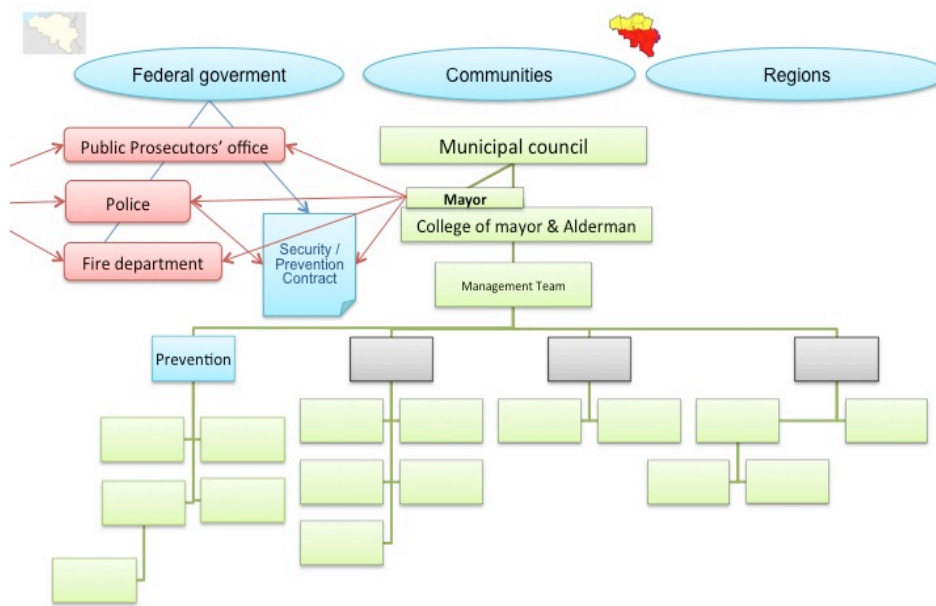


Fig. 3: Prevention in the Belgian municipalities

Via these contracts, the municipal authorities were, for the first time, stimulated and financially motivated to organise a preventive-repressive security management strategy (Cartuyvels & Hebberecht, 2002). External input proved to be necessary for the take off of crime prevention initiatives.

Over the following years, the scheme extended and included more and more municipalities. New prevention strands arose, such as drug abuse, public safety wardens and urban renewal. But these domains sort of 'invaded' the competences of the communities and the regions. Therefore, the federal government eventually decided to retreat and focus on their competence in the form of 'situational' crime prevention.

Meanwhile, the regions and communities developed their own policies directed at the municipalities, which are directly relevant to tackle crime and insecurity. For example youth policies or infrastructural projects. To be sure, some of these policies used to be in the security contracts, but are now developed autonomously by the regions or communities. The coordination of these policies for the sake of safety and security should take place at the level of the municipalities. But the structures and actors introduced by the federal security contracts remained of key importance.

While the French inspired the contractual approach (Roché, 2005), we started looking at our Dutch neighbours during the end of the nineties. They had developed a so-called 'integrated safety policy' (see Van Swaaningen, 2005). The central idea is that the local governments should expand their existing crime prevention policies and create an umbrella, a local integral safety policy. The focus is no longer purely on the prevention of crime. Integrated security policies should think about all kinds of safety problems and security issues, such as road-safety, antisocial behaviour and disaster management.

Moreover, an integrated safety approach shouldn't be limited to preventative measures and post-facto reactions. To include the causes of unsafety, and integrated approach should pay attention to all the different phases of the so called safety-chain: from the proactive elimination of structural causes of unsafety over the prevention and preparation of actual violations towards the actual solving of the problem and handling the so-called after-care, including a thorough evaluation and avoiding secondary victimization. It's a concise framework that draws attention to structural causes

and secondary effects and integrates this within a multi-actor and multi-agency approach (Bauwens & Enhus, 2011).

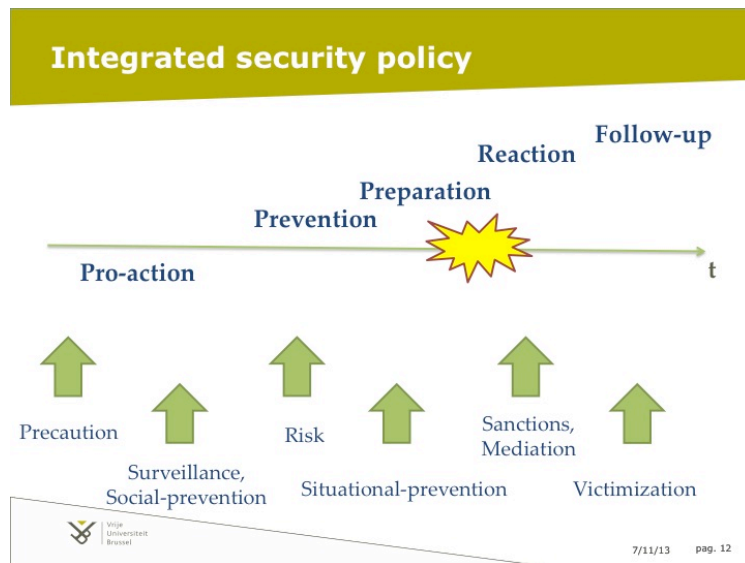


Fig. 4: Integrated security policy in Belgium

But as these different rationalities enter the field, it has interfaces with various government policy fields and different policy levels. Once again: the youth policies of the communities, for example, or the infrastructural projects of the regions. This means that relevant policy domains of other levels governments and actions of other institutions and organisations should be identified and included in this approach.

They tried to elaborate this approach on the higher levels of government by seeking to identify the different relevant policy domains and coordinate them accordingly. But ever since the first version of this integrated policy approach in 2004, they failed to do so. It is now up to the local governments to merge these ideas and bring them into practice, despite this fragmentation. But the local reception of this policy remains nonetheless contested.

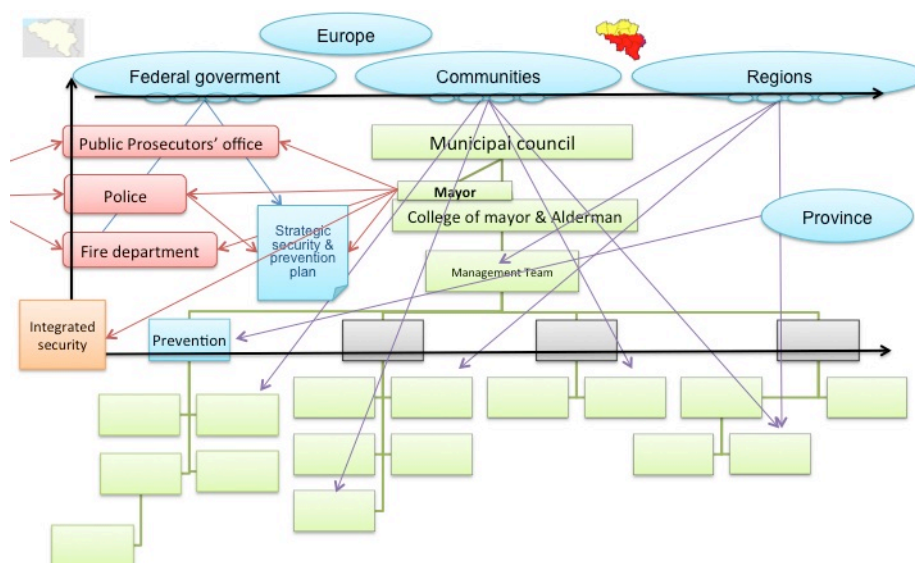


Fig. 5: Security policy in Belgium municipalities

The reason is that every municipality has their own ideas, ambitions, possibilities and restrictions in regard to local crime and security policies. Every configuration is different. These were, for example, the configurations in the three cities I've studied.

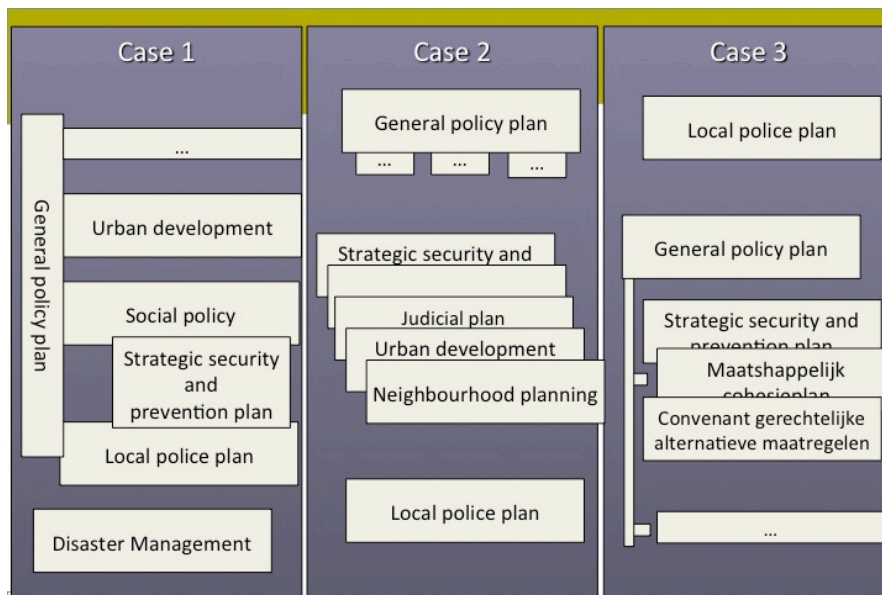


Fig. 6: configurations in local security policies

In the first case, the local security policy was actually part of the general strategic policy plan for the city and is used to stimulate reflection about security within the different policy domains of the city. In the second city, the local security policy is decoupled from this general strategic policy plan. It has its own structure and is coordinated as a stand-alone policy domain.

There is no need to elaborate on each case individually. It shows that different municipalities have different configurations, different structures and, consequently, different actors involved in the coordination of security. Some civil servants for prevention now coordinate the integrated security efforts of the municipality, while other cities hire an extra employee specifically for this task.

Take, **for example**, the prevention service of Brussels. They coordinate Socio-cultural projects (such as expositions of local youth, graffiti workshops), youth centres with their specific activities and events, neighbourhood wardens, mediation services and municipal sanctions. If they organise a football tournament with the local youth in a city park, this is possible by drawing on different funding and using different policy areas. The federal strategic safety and security plans for the general coordination and logistic assistance, the funding for community warrants for general surveillance and the security and community contracts for the local youth worker. Consequently, not only the policy domain of 'prevention', but also of 'youth' and 'sports', as well as local external organisations are involved. In practice, this is not a problem, because that is what a city does. But if you have to account for it explicitly on paper, explain what you doing, with whom and using what kind of funding, it gets complicated very quickly. The output of particular policies and the outcome of these projects is not the same.

The point is, if you want to talk and think about the coordination of local security practices, in Belgium, you should take these specific local configurations as a point of departure. The different policy domains and the different levels of government are already fused into these configurations. But it is not only about identifying the policy domains and levels that are involved and the way they interconnect, it is also – and arguably especially – about the actors, the people that are involved and the way they are connected, or disconnected. In Belgium, it is the mayor who effectively embodies

the unifying link between various domains, organisations and structures related to 'safety' and 'security'. But in practice, some other actors perform these tasks as well.

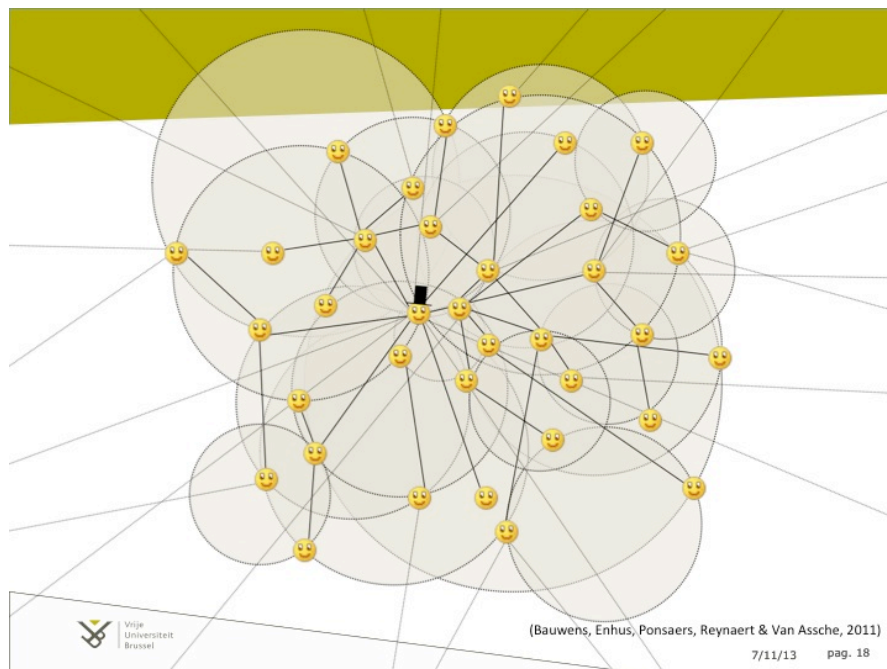


Fig. 7: networks, nodes and actors in security

Do realise that every diagram with smiley faces, has complexities underneath it. But I hope it helps to make my point clear: security policies are embedded in complex local configurations, especially if you broaden the scope and include other kinds of insecurity issues. Instead of ignoring this complexity, we should take it as our point of departure.

Conclusion

To briefly recapitulate: Belgian local crime policy was stimulated and financially facilitated by the federal government. A civil servant for prevention was installed in about 300 municipalities and prevention emerged as a local policy domain. But as the scope of preventative initiatives grew, pushed by a new discourse of 'intergrated security', other policy domain and actors had to be included as well. Attempts to tune this at the level of the higher governments failed, so the local government became principally charged with the local coordination of prevention and security measures. But the different local configurations, priorities and possibilities hinder a global overview and adjustment.

Our suggestion in the policy supporting research, then, was not to impose rigid local security frameworks for the local governments to implement, but to install visiting committees. Visiting committees already exist in academia and schools, in prisons and in the Flemish regional urban policy domain with the purpose of quality control. These visiting committees are typically made up of external independent experts. Based on documents, interviews and site visits, they report on the local situations.

Visiting committees seem to be very well suited to monitor and review the policy configurations, taking the local specificity into account. The focus of our committees is not only on reporting and evaluating, but on communication and the exchange of information. The visiting committee should work within a specified frame of reference. But the relevance of this document and the applicability of its content is always negotiated with the local practice. Ultimately, it is the local situation that will

determine the composition of the visiting committee. Herein lies the added value of these visiting committees.

So, returning to the image I began with, did we manage to transform Escher's waterfall into a functioning machine in real life?



Fig. 8: Escher in practice (youtube.com)

This clip seems to suggest that the counterintuitive is in fact possible. In a minute, you will see the water flowing and the wheel spinning in this real life set-up of Escher's waterfall. The guy did a great job in recreating the waterfall, but the result is not a self-sustaining perpetual mobile. But this depiction is in fact merely an optical illusion.

Self-sustaining systems are physically impossible. Input is required. In Belgium, this input was delivered by the security contracts and the installation of the civil servant for prevention. But this work of art also reminds us that safety and security policies are not only about finding and coordinating effective and efficient solutions. It is about the management of perceptions as well, and the results of visiting committees could shatter some dreams in that regard – so they were never installed. But we still believe that they provide the best solution for the government to cope with the local complexity and take it as a point of departure, instead of artificially simplifying the reality of the local configurations. As Janet Foster (2002) argued: *"Community crime prevention [...] is bedevilled by complexity – a crucial but frequently neglected starting point."*

Thank you for your attention.

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